



ABIDING IN CHRIST,
ABOUNDING IN HOPE

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2006

SECTION B

VOICES & VISIONS

THE NEHEMIAH INITIATIVE IS COMING...

Responding to growth potential in the Southeast Conference

What is the Nehemiah Initiative, you ask?

The United Church of Christ's Still Speaking Campaign, designed to heighten awareness about the denomination across the nation, has sparked a whirlwind of interest in the Southeast. On the UCC's "Find-a-Church" website, our Conference is getting more "hits" than all of the other Conferences combined! This tells us two things: 1) We have enormous potential for growth, and 2) we need to start planting more churches to meet the interest.

To that end, the members of our Conference staff who are developing new church strategies—Tim Downs, Bennie Liggins, and Cameron Trimble—traveled to Las Vegas in November to participate in the Conference for New Church Development, sponsored by our national UCC staff. Tim, Bennie, and Cameron each made a presentation, covering such topics as developing the Nehemiah Initiative, nurturing strong church-start leaders, and creating networking systems for more than seventy-five new church developers working around the country. Their presentations were based on the years of experience that each has doing this work, and the response from colleagues was very positive.

The Nehemiah Initiative is in its final development phase, and we hope to implement our strategy in June of 2006. The vision of the initiative is to do the following:

- Continue our successful efforts at cultivating congregations that wish to affiliate with the United Church of Christ. We have three congregations that have joined the UCC in the last several years, two that are about to join, and several others in discussion with us concerning joining.
- Sustain our focus around congregational vitality in established churches. We will continue to engage churches that seek congregational renewal, providing them with support and resources from the Conference's Covenant for Renewal program and the Still Speaking Campaign.



The United Church of Cookeville, Tennessee, was visited in December by Bennie Liggins and Cameron Trimble, who conducted interviews in all the Southeast Conference's new church starts, to assess needs and glean material for writing a resource manual. The Cookeville congregation, which was launched in 2003, was praised for its strong commitment to mission projects, its emphasis on education and worship, and its open fellowship. From left to right are Tom Eckert (pastor), Cynthia Wilson, John Nisbet, Cameron Trimble, Bennie Liggins, Bob Bay, Anita Bay, and Dale Wilson.

- Establish at least ten new and viable UCC churches in the Southeast Conference by 2010.

We intend to meet this vision by increasing our lay and ecclesiastical leadership capacity through recruitment, assessment, training, and mentoring; generating and directing the use of financial resources to respond to the Great Commission ("Go therefore and make disciples..."—Matthew 28:19-20); and advancing local and national efforts to promote the mission and identity of the United Church of Christ. We also plan to develop and implement a standardized strategy for individual congregations starting new churches in the United Church of Christ, and to establish benchmarks and timelines assuring accountability for new churches and their leadership.

The Southeast Conference is applying for funding to enable us to develop training courses for leadership development, increase our staffing to more adequately respond to our local churches, and set up national mentoring programs for our local clergy interested in further training. Bennie Liggins and Cameron Trimble spent two months traveling to every new

congregation birthed in the Southeast Conference within the last nine years, conducting an assessment of how the Conference might improve its support of local churches.

We are convinced that God is still speaking to the Southeast Conference, and we are preparing for the journey ahead. Like the ancient people of God who were confronted with an opportunity, we declare, "The people have a mind to build" (Nehemiah 4:6). More details on new church development and the Nehemiah Initiative can be found on the Conference website.

INSIDE

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| FROM THE CONFERENCE MINISTER | 2 |
| LAY MINISTRY EDUCATION NETWORK | 3 |
| CONCERNS AND CELEBRATIONS | 3 |
| MESSAGE FROM BACK BAY MISSION | 4 |

"I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT UPON ALL . . .
AND YOUR YOUNG SHALL SEE VISIONS AND
YOUR OLD SHALL DREAM DREAMS."

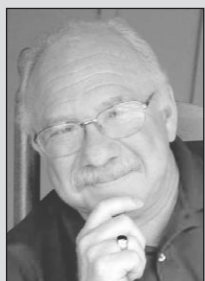
ACTS 2:17

From the Conference Minister

Dear Friends,

For five days in early November, Joyce Hollyday and I represented the Southeast Conference at a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Kirchengemeinschaft*, the ecumenical

FROM THE
CONFERENCE
MINISTER



partnership between the United Church of Christ and the Evangelical Church of the Union in Germany. The theme of the Berlin gathering was

taken from Micah 4:3-4—"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks"—and focused on the building of a just peace. In 2000, the Southeast Conference played a small part in the *Kirchengemeinschaft* partnership, when we hosted a delegation of pastors and lay leaders from Germany, who visited us for two weeks to explore issues of racial and social justice, and the ways in which we engage them in our congregations.

I was not prepared to fall in love with the city of Berlin, with its trees and parks, its seamless mass transportation, its smoothly flowing traffic of small cars

and bicycles, its grand museums, stunning churches, and dignified public buildings—but I did. It is a city that has recovered beautifully from the ravages of war, Cold War division, and decades of gray totalitarian rule. I found myself moved by the remnants of the past: the jagged yet sacred ruin of a Protestant cathedral, preserved as a reminder of the Allied blanket bombing which destroyed it and the surrounding neighborhood during World War II; memorials of the Holocaust; and other reminders of the cruel excesses of Nazi and Communist oppression.

I stood before the central synagogue of Berlin, beautifully restored and rededicated on November 9, 1988, fifty years to the day after *Kristall Nacht*, when the Nazis stormed through the streets smashing Jewish storefronts and destroying synagogues and schools. As I stood there, I wondered what this would have evoked in the heart of my mother-in-law, Licy, who was 16 years old in 1938; a year later, she fled Vienna, Austria, a Jewish refugee after the Nazi invasion and occupation. After seeing the synagogue, we paused at a memorial to the hundreds who lost their lives attempting to flee over or tunnel

under the Berlin wall.

A few evenings later, I was walking with friends across a broad plaza and

"GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE . . ."

saw a shaft of light in the night before me.

When I peered through the glass window in the pavement from which the light shone, I saw below a white room lined with empty bookshelves. The person standing next to me whispered, "This is a memorial on the site of a Nazi book burning." Books of Jewish origin were taken from the shelves of a nearby library and burned here.

These monuments, and more, were signs of the scars of a nation's travail embedded in its soul. I was deeply moved time and again by our conversations with German colleagues who engaged these scars with openness and honesty. They spoke to us with gentle clarity about the troubling signs they see in our life as a nation here in the United States.

One said, "Our nation, once filled with the conviction of its Aryan superiority, invaded other countries. We are troubled that the United States seems guided by a similar arrogance about its particular calling, which allows it to invade other nations with impunity."

Together we considered the alliance that has been shaped between the Religious Right in the United States and our current government, and the ways in which this may resemble the complicity between much of the German church and the Third Reich.

We also considered the role of the Confessing Church, which did indeed confront the rise of Nazism in Germany and declared that "Christ alone is Lord" above all claims of powers and principalities. My mind turned to the number of times I as a pastor had questioned—over the protests of deacons and elders of my congregations—the symbolism of the flag of our nation in the front of our sanctuaries, in which we worship and proclaim, in the words of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, "Jesus Christ is the sole head of the Church."

These are indeed days for somber reflection about the role of our nation in the world, and how we are seen by others. The lens of German experience shines a troubling light on our own as Americans today. May we remain open to the questions that stir in our hearts, and to the God who calls us as a church to faithful witness for the living of these days.

Peace,
Timothy C. Downs

NEW ADDRESS AND WEBSITE DESIGN!

The Conference Office has moved to **1330 West Peachtree Street, Suite #344, Atlanta, GA 30309**. Phone and fax numbers remain the same.

The Conference website has been redesigned. A new addition, the "SEC Online Forum," allows YOU (after you register through the site) to post announcements, prayer requests, sermon ideas, and suggestions for church development. There are also spaces for communication with and between Associations. Youth workers can access current information about youth programming, check out last year's programs and read comments by participants, and download application forms. If you have any questions or need assistance, contact Cameron Trimble in the Conference office. www.secucc.org

VOICES & VISIONS

Voices & Visions, the Southeast Conference United Church of Christ section of the United Church News (USPS 764-070) is published four times a year. Its mission is to promote current events and conference news, offering information and inspiration to members. Views expressed in editorials, letters, and signed columnists are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official Conference or UCC policies.

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Mary Miller Brueggemann (left) was the main presenter at the fourteenth Southern Region Biennial Meeting of United Church of Christ women, held at Epworth by the Sea retreat center on St. Simons Island, Georgia, in October. Members of Central Congregational UCC in Atlanta surprised Mary, who led the group in an inspiring Bible study of Philippians, with balloons, a plant, and a birthday card signed by most of the more than two hundred women from four southern Conferences in attendance. Twenty-three women from the Southeast Conference enjoyed the weekend's moving worship and wonderful camaraderie, as well as an interlude of jazz music, a silent auction, and a trolley tour of the island. The next regional women's retreat will be held in 2007 in Blowing Rock, North Carolina.

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

Lay Ministry Education Network launched

In early December 2005, educational leaders from throughout the United Church of Christ gathered in Cleveland, Ohio. The purpose of their meeting was to form a Lay Ministry Education Network, connecting programs of judicatory-based theological education and lay ministry training. Twenty-six programs were represented from the thirty-nine conferences of the UCC. Kathy Clark, Associate Conference Minister for the Southeast Conference and Director of the Theology Among the People (TAP) program, was one of the meeting organizers and preached at the opening worship service of the event.

"This network has been a vision and dream for many of us involved in this work for a number of years," stated Gene Miller, Conference Minister of the South Dakota Conference. The network will provide a vehicle for program directors to develop minimum standards for core curricula, share resources, engage in program peer reviews, and advocate on behalf of the "priesthood of all believers" and lay ministry both in the church and the world.

Ed Martin, retired professor from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, was the keynote speaker for the meeting, and served as a "listener/responder" to the conversations regarding the purpose and scope of the network. Martin is the co-author, with Lance Barker, of *Multiple Paths to Ministry: New Models for Theological Education*. Martin noted that, without judicatory programs, "there would be no witness to the Gospel [through trained leadership] in some settings." Several factors contribute to this reality: population shifts, declining

membership in mainline denominations, and economic realities of small churches, along with significant increases in the costs of seminary education.

Martin outlined a vision in which the church will seek to reaffirm the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers; to develop mutual ministry models that discern, authorize, value, and use the many gifts for ministry present in our churches; and to prepare churches, and not just individuals, for ministry. Seminaries and judicatory programs need to work together to provide multiple methods of theological education "to equip the saints for ministry and build up the Body of Christ" (Ephesians.4:12).

Kathy Clark gave a presentation on the TAP program, highlighting the cohort model of intentional learning communities; the integrated curriculum that weaves together biblical study, theological reflection, and ministry practices; and the educational methodology of the program. She will serve as a member of the organizing committee of the Lay Ministry Education Network, focusing in particular on the development of a core curriculum, minimum standards, and peer review process for member programs.

TAP, a mission of the Southeast Conference, is a judicatory-based program of theological education designed to help participants discover their own theologies and develop their ministerial skills within the context of intentional learning communities. For information about starting a TAP group in your congregation, please email Kathy Clark at kclark@secucc.org.

Fall Gathering

October 21-22, 2005
at United Church of Huntsville, Alabama



Seventy-five people from sixteen of the Association's twenty-three congregations enjoyed worship, workshops, and fellowship. David Greenhaw, president of Eden Theological Seminary, was the keynote speaker. The weekend included a time of honoring the rich legacies of two recently deceased ministers of the Association, Milton Hurst and Wilson Welch, and the gathering approved Kim Shelton for ordination, pending a call. An offering was taken for St. Matthews UCC in New Orleans, to enable the church to install showers and refurbish its electrical system in order to house people attending post-Katrina work camps in 2006. The weekend ended with a hot dog supper.

Concerns and Celebrations

Arnold Slater, Pastor Emeritus of Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga, TN, celebrated his 100th birthday in December. **DaVita CarterMcCallister** has been called to serve as Minister for Youth, Young Adults, and Outdoors with the Worship and Education Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries of the UCC. **Deer Lodge Congregational UCC** in Deer Lodge, TN, called **Rose Hermonat** of Pleasant Hill as pastor. **James Schwarzlose** participated in a gathering of fifty clergy selected by *The Upper Room* for a pilot program called "Companions in Ministry." **Toby Sanders** was installed as pastor of Beloved Community, a congregation in Trenton, NJ. The **Metropolitan Community Church of Columbia, SC**, was accepted as a congregation in exploration of covenant with the United Church of Christ by the Georgia-South Carolina Association Church and Ministry Committee, and **Holy Trinity**, a rapidly growing nondenominational congregation in Nashville, TN, voted to take next steps toward affiliation with the UCC. The East Alabama-West Georgia Association Church and Ministry Committee granted licenses for ministry to **Rip Hardman** and **Hugh Hogan**. We express our deepest sympathy to those who have suffered the loss of loved ones: **John Mingus** for the loss of his mother, Mercedes White Mingus, **Lesley Brogan** for the passing of her mother, Barbara Brogan, and **Joyce Myers Brown** for the passing of her mother, Ethel Myers; **Jim Norris** for the sudden and unexpected death of his wife, Sally, and **Robert Rezash** for the loss of his wife, Anita; and **Roy Bain** for the loss of his brother, James Bain.

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING...

And the PEPP/TAP class of Montgomery, Alabama, is listening

Psalm 133:1 reads, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity!" This was the spirit of participants in Montgomery, Alabama's joint venture of the Southeast Conference's TAP (Theology Among the People) program and PEPP, a similar lay theology program of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), as they came together to plan, promote, and produce an ecumenical Christmas Eve worship service. The service was an idea that was conceived during the conclusion of the PEPP/TAP session on Worship and Sacrament, led by Dr. Susan Diamond, Pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The class thought that it would be a testimony to the work of the "People who are Energized, Prepared, and Productive, and spreading Theology Among the People," to share their experience with their congregations and the wider Montgomery community of faith. Listening to the voice of the "still speaking God," planners birthed a worship theme: "In the Still of the Night." For we know that it was by night that many came to pay homage to the Christ Child as he lay in a manger filled with hay. It is and was "by night" that we as sinners come to Christ, who is the Light of the World.

Two UCC churches and two from the Disciples of Christ tradition—Community Congregational UCC, First Congregational UCC, First Christian Church, and United Christian Church—along with



Feeding the Multitude of Montgomery, a local outreach ministry, came together to celebrate the birth of Christ through scripture, song and symbols. Worshippers young and old, black and white, gathered at Community Congregational UCC, where TAP participant Dorinda Broadnax serves as Associate Pastor. The sanctuary was adorned with holiday flowers and candles, and soft music rendered by musicians from each congregation created an atmosphere of hope and serenity. The worship space set the tone for each individual to reflect, confess, and reconcile themselves with each other and with God as they witnessed a "great hour of sharing" blessings from on high. Interfaith Hospitality Network, a new ministry beginning this year in Montgomery to address the needs of homeless families, was the recipient of the offering that was collected.

MESSAGE FROM BACK BAY MISSION



By Nancy Wilson

Greetings to you from Back Bay Mission in Biloxi! This ministry, which serves the poorest of the poor along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, has served as a UCC voice for more than eighty years. Especially at this time, when the Mission buildings and staff have been battered and bruised by Hurricane Katrina, we appreciate your care, concern, and prayers.

Ironically, just at the time when the Mission was critically needed to serve the ravaged Gulf Coast following the storm, we had no place from which to serve, and staff members were traumatized from their personal losses of homes and belongings. We were forced to salve our consciences by finally realizing that Back Bay Mission would regroup, would be back, would serve again...when other relief agencies had packed up and gone home.

Imagine our reaction upon being informed that five of our seven Mission buildings should be demolished. The remaining two would have to be "mucked out" (new terminology for us) and rebuilt from the studs out. Not only were buildings destroyed and severely damaged, three valuable staff members have moved on, leaving tremendous voids to fill. But here we are several months later, working from two trailers.

Progress has been slow; every little step forward has been celebrated: the arrival of the first trailer, computers for all staff members, phone system installation, access to the internet, and welcoming new staff members. Along with re-establishing the Mission's presence on-campus, programs have resumed as well. Emergency assistance—without the customary food pantry and thrift store—is offering monetary help in the areas of utility relief, prescription drug costs, and gasoline. When word got out that we were assisting folks, we filled all available appointments through the end of the year in one day! The same thing occurred when we announced we would be providing gifts for Christmas; we signed up 427 children in one day! Those two events indicate the tremendous need throughout the community. From October 24 through November 30, the Mission dispensed more than \$16,000 in emergency assistance to more than 100 families. This is only a small percentage of those who have been left jobless or homeless.

Opportunities for work teams to restore housing along the Mississippi Gulf Coast have resumed. Peg

Jacobs, a staff member supplied by the UCC specifically to coordinate work groups, is busily scheduling groups well into 2006 and beyond. The need to rebuild and restore housing stock is urgent and critical.

Yet, progress is painfully slow and thousands are still suffering. More than 100 days into this new post-Katrina reality, statistics are being released that help to characterize this mind-numbing experience. Two hundred and thirty people who perished in Mississippi because of Hurricane Katrina have now been identified. Five remain unidentified, and 68 others are still considered "missing." Unemployment hovers at nearly 25 percent. More than 64,000 homes in the three southernmost counties in Mississippi are totally destroyed, and another 65,000 homes are heavily damaged. It is estimated that 44 million cubic yards of debris will have to be removed, but more than half of that remains at this date. Twenty-three thousand families now call FEMA trailers home, but at least 10,000 more families still await them.

The numbers are absolutely staggering. For those who live here, those numbers are extremely personal. However, in the midst of the rubble and human pain lie incredible opportunities for the Mission. The Board of Directors and staff will prayerfully and thoughtfully plan for the future ministry of the Mission. It is the time to be bold in envisioning what God is calling us to be and do in this post-Katrina reality.

Specifically, what can you do to help? Consider....

- bringing a work team to Biloxi
- sponsoring a shrimp dinner (or "shrimpless dinner," as we've had to do since the storm) and donating the proceeds
- reviewing the replacement gift registry on our website, www.backbaymission.com, and making a donation
- contributing financial support earmarked for emergency assistance to needy clients or to purchase building supplies to rebuild storm-devastated homes

Again, we sincerely appreciate your concern and prayers for the wellbeing of Back Bay Mission. You can contact us or get more information through our website, by calling 228-432-0301, or by writing us at Back Bay Mission, 1012 Division Street, Biloxi, MS 39530.

Nancy Wilson is Director of Development for Back Bay Mission.

CONFERENCE CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

1-17 Conference staff trip to Thailand

MARCH

10-12 Youth Ministry Leadership, Pilgrim House, Chattanooga, TN.
17-18 Board of Directors Meeting, place to be announced.

APRIL

27-30 Annual UCCOSSN (Support Staff Network) meeting, Cleveland, OH.

MAY

5-7 Youth Ministry Long-Term Survival, Pilgrim House, Chattanooga, TN.

JUNE

9-10 Southeast Conference Annual Meeting, First Congregational Christian UCC, Birmingham, AL
9-14 "Rekindle the Gift" youth immersion and civil rights tour.
21-25 "Mix in '06" (UCC and Disciples of Christ women), Indianapolis, IN; www.dreamonsisters.com.
22-25 UCC Regional Youth Event, Elon University; www.godsaysitstime.net

JULY

16-27 Youth Wilderness Immersion, Johns River Valley Camp, Boone, NC.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

- A feasibility study for a Conference capital campaign will be developed in 2006.
- The Bylaws Committee is planning to have a constitution and bylaws to present to the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Conference, to be put in place provisionally for one year and finalized in 2007.
- The Board approved purchase of a vehicle by the Conference for the use of the Executive Director of the TAP Program.
- The Board authorized the Conference to establish an account with the Cornerstone Fund.
- DART (Disaster Assistance Relief Team) has received \$15,000 to assist evacuees from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast who have settled within the Conference. Congregations of the Conference have contributed more than \$30,000 to the hurricane relief efforts of Church World Service.